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Experiential avoidance, impostor phenomenon and fear of negative evaluation among Indian college students

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Abstract

Experiential avoidance (EA), impostor phenomenon (IP), and fear of negative evaluation (FNE) are theoretically related cognitive-emotional constructs that undermine psychological well-being and academic functioning in college students, yet their predictive and moderating interrelationships have not been empirically examined within a unified framework. This quantitative, correlational, cross-sectional study tested seven hypotheses in a convenience sample of 303 Indian college students (aged 18–25 years) using the Brief Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire (BEAQ), Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS), and Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (BFNE). Due to violations of normality, Spearman's rank-order correlations, simple linear regression, and PROCESS Macro Model 1 moderation analysis (Hayes, 2022) were employed. All seven hypotheses were supported. Significant positive intercorrelations were found among all three variables (r_s = 0.52– 0.59, $p < 0.001$). Experiential avoidance significantly predicted both IP ($\beta = 0.528$, $R^2 = 0.279$) and FNE ($\beta = 0.582$, $R^2 = 0.339$), and IP significantly predicted FNE ($\beta = 0.568$, $R^2 = 0.323$). Moderation analysis revealed that EA significantly attenuated the IP–FNE relationship ($\Delta R^2 = 0.042$, $p < 0.001$), with the full model explaining 47.4% of variance in FNE. These findings identify experiential avoidance as a functionally central construct and suggest that ACT-based interventions targeting EA may reduce both impostor beliefs and evaluative fear in Indian college student populations.

Keywords: Experiential Avoidance; Impostor Phenomenon; Fear of Negative Evaluation; College Students; Moderation; Acceptance and Commitment Therapy; Indian Higher Education

1. Introduction

University students across the globe face a diverse range of psychological challenges that threaten both their well-being and academic success. Systematic reviews reveal that these difficulties encompass high rates of depression, anxiety, stress, and adjustment problems, exacerbated by factors unique to higher education environments such as academic workload, social isolation, and financial insecurity [1][2]. Multiple studies underscore that approximately 20% of college students worldwide have experienced a diagnosable mental disorder within a year, with most conditions developing even before university entry; untreated or poorly managed mental health issues are associated with substantially higher risks of academic dropout [1]. Vulnerable groups including women, international students, first-year entrants, and those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds consistently report higher levels of psychological distress and are less likely to seek adequate support due to stigma and limited mental health resources [3]. Academic performance is a critical measure of student success in higher education, serving as an essential indicator of learning, skill acquisition, and readiness for future careers. Conversely, poor academic performance is associated with higher dropout rates, psychological distress, and limited career opportunities, underscoring the urgency of identifying malleable psychological risk factors that impair student functioning [4].

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Three psychological constructs are of particular relevance to understanding student vulnerability in higher education: experiential avoidance (EA), impostor phenomenon (IP), and fear of negative evaluation (FNE). Experiential avoidance refers to the rigid unwillingness to remain in contact with distressing internal experiences such as anxiety about academic failure or self-doubt and the behavioural tendency to escape or suppress such experiences rather than engage with them [5]. Among college students, this pattern is especially consequential because the academic environment demands sustained engagement with challenging, evaluatively threatening tasks that routinely generate internal discomfort. EA has been associated with lower grade point averages, reduced academic persistence, greater procrastination, and heightened dropout risk [6][7]. Within Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), EA is conceptualised as a transdiagnostic maladaptive process that entrenches psychopathology through experiential narrowing and reduced value-consistent action [8]. The ACT framework proposes six core processes that counteract avoidance: acceptance (willing contact with experiences), cognitive defusion (distancing from literal thought content), flexible present-moment awareness, self-as-context, values clarification, and committed action. These processes collectively build psychological flexibility, which is the ability to contact the present moment fully while persisting or changing behaviour in service of chosen values, even amid discomfort [8]. Meta-analyses report moderate-to-large effects of ACT-based programmes ($d = 0.52–0.82$) on anxiety reduction and academic performance gains in student samples.

The impostor phenomenon describes a persistent internal sense of intellectual fraudulence in which individuals attribute their academic successes to luck, timing, or interpersonal charm rather than genuine ability, despite objective evidence of competence [9]. Prevalence estimates suggest that between 37% and 82% of college students experience clinically significant impostor feelings at some point during their studies, with higher rates reported among women, first-generation students, and those from minority backgrounds [10]. Clance (1985) [11] identified two primary self-perpetuating cycles through which impostor feelings are generated and maintained. In the first cycle, the individual responds to an impending achievement task with intense anxiety, leading either to over-preparation and hard work or to procrastination; in both cases, subsequent success is attributed to effort expended rather than ability, leaving the core fraudulence belief intact and the cycle ready to repeat. In the second cycle, initial confidence is followed by success attributed to luck or charm, again reinforcing the impostor self-concept. Critically, both cycles share a common feature: success disconfirms the fraudulence belief only temporarily, because the individual generates alternative explanations that preserve the impostor self-concept. Social Comparison Theory [12] further frames IP as arising from maladaptive upward social comparisons in achievement domains that lack clear performance benchmarks, while Self-Discrepancy Theory [13] attributes it to salient gaps between the actual self, the ideal self, and the ought self. Individually, IP has been consistently associated with anxiety, depression, diminished self-efficacy, burnout, and delayed help-seeking [10][14].

Fear of negative evaluation is the apprehension and distress associated with anticipating, receiving, or perceiving negative judgments from others, and constitutes a core cognitive feature of social anxiety that is particularly activated by the evaluative demands of academic life [15][16]. Clark and Wells' [16] cognitive model positions FNE as central to the maintenance of social anxiety: during perceived scrutiny such as oral presentations or group evaluations, detailed self-imagery of poor performance activates biased attention to threat cues, safety behaviours (e.g., minimal eye contact, script-reading), and post-event rumination, which collectively prevent the disconfirmation of evaluative fears. Among college students, elevated FNE predicts avoidance of class discussions and group work, impairs critical thinking and networking opportunities, and is associated with 20–30% lower participation scores and significant motivation deficits [17]. Research has further identified structural inequities in active-learning pedagogies that may inadvertently amplify FNE among already marginalised students, including first-generation college students and students with disabilities.

These three constructs overlap considerably in the college environment, where high-stakes academic demands amplify evaluative fears, self-doubt, and avoidance behaviours. All three converge on the avoidance of distress signals: internal for EA, achievement-related for IP, and interpersonal for FNE and share 30-45% of variance through inflexible psychological responding [5]. Bandura's (1986) [19] self-efficacy theory provides a unifying framework: EA disrupts self-efficacy by motivating withdrawal from challenging tasks before mastery can be achieved, thereby depriving students of the enactive mastery experiences that are the most potent source of efficacy beliefs [6]; IP reflects a chronic failure to internalise those mastery experiences as evidence of genuine competence [20]; and FNE amplifies the threatening interpretation of physiological arousal in evaluative settings, further eroding academic self-efficacy. The integrated conceptual model proposed in the present study posits that EA functions as a proximal predictor of both IP and FNE: the unwillingness to engage with distressing internal experiences erodes self-efficacy and primes impostor cognitions through unprocessed self-doubt, and these impostor beliefs in turn heighten sensitivity to evaluative scrutiny and elevate FNE. Path models from comparable undergraduate samples estimate standardised coefficients of $\beta = 0.28–0.45$ for the EA → IP → FNE pathway, collectively explaining 25–40% of the variance in academic underperformance [18][20].

Despite growing recognition of each construct individually, the literature has yet to adequately address how these three psychological processes interact with one another among college students. Prior research has examined these variables in isolation, IP in minority or professional samples [30][31], FNE in specific disciplinary courses, and EA in transdiagnostic or clinical contexts [26][27] without examining the predictive or moderating relationships that may exist among them. Crucially, no prior study has examined whether EA moderates the relationship between IP and FNE, despite the theoretical plausibility of such a mechanism within the ACT and cognitive anxiety frameworks. Furthermore, research in this domain has been heavily concentrated in Western, predominantly English-speaking contexts, with general college student populations in non-Western settings such as India substantially underserved. In the Indian higher education context, cultural expectations of perfectionism, collectivist family pressures, and highly competitive academic environments may intensify the dynamics of avoidance, self-doubt, and evaluative fear in ways that are not captured by Western-derived models [21][22]. The present study was designed to address this gap by empirically testing the predictive and moderating relationships among EA, IP, and FNE in a sample of Indian college students, thereby contributing both to theoretical understanding and to the evidence base for targeted psychological interventions in higher education.

Objectives and Hypotheses

The primary aim of the present study was to examine the relationships among EA, IP, and FNE among Indian college students, and to investigate the predictive and moderating role of EA in these relationships.

- H1: There will be a significant positive relationship between experiential avoidance and impostor phenomenon among college students.
- H2: There will be a significant positive relationship between experiential avoidance and fear of negative evaluation among college students.
- H3: There will be a significant positive relationship between impostor phenomenon and fear of negative evaluation among college students.
- H4: Experiential avoidance will significantly predict impostor phenomenon among college students.
- H5: Experiential avoidance will significantly predict fear of negative evaluation among college students.
- H6: Impostor phenomenon will significantly predict fear of negative evaluation among college students.
- H7: Experiential avoidance will significantly moderate the relationship between impostor phenomenon and fear of negative evaluation among college students.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This investigation employed a quantitative, cross-sectional design combining correlational and predictive approaches.

2.2. Participants and Sampling

The final sample comprised 303 college students currently enrolled at various Indian academic institutions, spanning both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Eligibility was restricted to those aged 18 to 25 years. Gender was coded as 1 (male) and 2 (female) (M = 1.58, SD = 0.50), indicating a slight majority of female participants. Education was coded as 1 (undergraduate) and 2 (postgraduate) (M = 1.60, SD = 0.49), reflecting a slight majority of postgraduate participants. Participants were recruited through purposive convenience sampling via digitally circulated survey links. Inclusion criteria required full-time enrolment and age between 18 and 25 years. Students on academic probation or experiencing challenges stemming from prolonged academic setbacks were excluded.

2.3. Instruments

Experiential avoidance was measured with the 15-item Brief Experiential Avoidance Questionnaire (BEAQ; Gámez et al., 2011) [23], employing a 6-point response format from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Higher total scores correspond to heightened avoidance. Prior research has documented satisfactory internal consistency (Cronbach's α = 0.80–0.86). Impostor feelings were measured using the 20-item Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS; Clance, 1985) [11], rated on a 5-point scale from not at all true to very true. The scale assesses persistent self-doubt, difficulty attributing achievements to personal ability, and anticipatory anxiety about exposure; it yields high reliability ($\alpha > 0.90$) across diverse academic samples. Evaluative anxiety was assessed using the 12-item Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (BFNE; Weeks et al., 2005) [17], employing a 5-point rating scale. The BFNE captures worry and distress when anticipating or receiving unfavourable judgements from others; internal consistency estimates approach.

2.4. Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Survey data were gathered electronically via a structured questionnaire hosted on Google Forms. Prior to responding, each participant received a study information sheet clarifying the research objectives, participation criteria, the voluntary and anonymous nature of involvement, and the estimated completion time of approximately 10 minutes. Digital informed consent was secured before respondents accessed any items. No personally identifying details were solicited. All participation was strictly voluntary and participants could withdraw at any stage without repercussion. Collected data were held in secure, password-protected storage and used exclusively for academic research. All procedures were designed to align with APA ethical standards for participant welfare and research integrity.

2.5. Data Analysis

Preliminary data summarization involved computing means, standard deviations, frequency counts, and distributional indices for all primary variables. Formal normality testing was carried out using the Shapiro-Wilk test. Given violations of normality in all three primary variables, non-parametric Spearman's rank-order correlation was employed for bivariate hypothesis testing. Simple linear regression was conducted for H4, H5, and H6. Moderation analysis for H7 was conducted using Hayes's (2022) [24] PROCESS Macro Model 1 for SPSS, employing ordinary least squares regression with bootstrap-based confidence intervals to estimate conditional effects at representative levels of the moderator variable. All variables were mean-centred prior to the moderation analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Tests of Normality

Results from the Shapiro-Wilk test indicated that all three variables significantly deviated from a normal distribution: Experiential Avoidance SW (303) = 0.964, $p < 0.001$; Impostor Phenomenon SW (303) = 0.941, $p < 0.001$; Fear of Negative Evaluation SW (303) = 0.930, $p < 0.001$ (Table 1). The violation of normality across all three variables necessitated the use of non-parametric statistical techniques for the bivariate analyses. While statistically significant, inspection of Normal Q-Q plots indicated that deviations were moderate in practical terms, with data points conforming reasonably to the diagonal reference line across the mid-range but diverging at the tails. The high sensitivity of the Shapiro-Wilk test at N = 303 should be noted when interpreting these results.

Table 1 Tests of Normality (Shapiro-Wilk) for Primary Variables (N = 303)

Shapiro-Wilk			
Variable	Statistic	df	p
Experiential Avoidance	0.964	303	<0.001
Impostor Phenomenon	0.941	303	<0.001
Fear of Negative Evaluation	0.930	303	<0.001

Note. All p-values confirmed statistically significant non-normality, necessitating non-parametric analyses.

3.2. Correlation Analysis

Table 2 presents Spearman's rank-order correlations among the three primary variables. H1 was supported: experiential avoidance demonstrated a significant moderate positive correlation with impostor phenomenon, $r_s(303) = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$. H2 was supported: experiential avoidance showed the strongest bivariate association in the study with fear of negative evaluation, $r_s(303) = 0.59$, $p < 0.001$. H3 was supported: impostor phenomenon and fear of negative evaluation were also significantly positively correlated, $r_s(303) = 0.57$, $p < 0.001$. All coefficients fell in the moderate-to-strong range by Cohen's (1988) conventions.

Table 2 Spearman's Rank-Order Correlations Among Experiential Avoidance, Impostor Phenomenon, and Fear of Negative Evaluation (N = 303)

Variable	Experiential Avoidance	Imposter Phenomenon	Fear of Negative Evaluation
Experiential Avoidance	-		
Imposter Phenomenon	0.523**	-	
Fear of Negative Evaluation	0.588**	0.573**	-

Note: p < 0.01** (2-tailed).

The significant positive correlations among EA, IP, and FNE (rs = 0.52–0.59) are consistent with the theoretical proposition that these three variables constitute a mutually reinforcing system of psychological inflexibility in the college student context. The strongest correlation was observed between EA and FNE (rs = 0.59), suggesting that the tendency to suppress or escape distressing internal experiences is particularly closely associated with evaluative anxiety. This finding aligns with Clark and Wells' [16] cognitive model, in which safety behaviours and avoidance of threatening situations maintain rather than reduce fear of negative judgment. From an ACT perspective, this association is consistent with the proposition that experiential avoidance narrows the individual's psychological repertoire, making aversive evaluative cues more threatening and harder to tolerate [8]. When students are unwilling to remain in contact with the discomfort generated by evaluative situations, fear is not extinguished but rather preserved and potentially intensified over time. The moderate correlation between EA and IP (rs = 0.52) supports the theoretical argument that avoidance prevents the direct confrontation and disconfirmation of fraudulence beliefs. When students avoid the anxiety associated with perceived incompetence rather than engaging with it, the impostor self-concept is insulated from corrective experience a mechanism described in Clance's [11] cyclical model of IP maintenance. This finding also converges with Badawy et al. [20] and Levin et al. [6], who linked experiential avoidance to reduced academic persistence, engagement, and avoidance-oriented academic behaviours including procrastination and reduced help-seeking. The correlation between IP and FNE (rs = 0.57) is theoretically coherent within both the social comparison and cognitive anxiety frameworks. Individuals high in IP are perpetually alert to the possibility of external discovery of their perceived incompetence, which is functionally equivalent to the vigilance for social threat that characterises FNE [16]. This finding is consistent with Cokley et al. [30] and Stone et al. [31], who documented the close association between impostor feelings and evaluative vigilance in diverse student populations.

3.3. Regression Analysis

Table 3 summarises results from the three simple linear regression models. H4 was supported: experiential avoidance was a significant positive predictor of impostor phenomenon, $F(1, 301) = 116.59$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.279$, $\beta = 0.528$. H5 was supported: experiential avoidance significantly predicted fear of negative evaluation in the strongest single-predictor model in the study, $F(1, 301) = 154.09$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.339$, $\beta = 0.582$. H6 was supported: impostor phenomenon significantly predicted fear of negative evaluation, $F(1, 301) = 143.71$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.323$, $\beta = 0.568$.

Table 3 Summary of Simple Linear Regression Analyses (N = 303)

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	SE	F	Sig.
EA → IP	0.528	0.279	0.277	18.588	116.587	0.000
EA → FNE	0.528	0.339	0.336	5.805	154.087	0.000
IP → FNE	0.568	0.323	0.321	5.872	143.71	0.000

Note. The regression model was statistically significant (p < 0.001).

The finding that EA accounted for approximately 28% of the variance in IP (H4, $\beta = 0.528$) provides direct empirical support for the theoretically proposed link between these constructs in an Indian college sample. This represents a substantial effect for a single predictor and positions EA as an upstream maintaining mechanism of impostor beliefs rather than merely a concurrent correlate. From an ACT perspective, unwillingness to remain in contact with distressing internal experiences such as self-doubt, fear of exposure, and academic anxiety actively sustains and intensifies impostor cognitions by preventing the psychological flexibility and cognitive reappraisal needed to disconfirm fraudulence beliefs [8]. This interpretation is consistent with Bandura's [19] self-efficacy theory: when EA leads individuals to withdraw from challenging academic situations, mastery experiences are bypassed, leaving impostor

beliefs uncorrected by direct evidence of genuine competence [6]. The present finding extends the work of Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch [28], who established fear of failure and avoidance-oriented behaviours as key antecedents of impostor phenomenon, by providing evidence from a previously understudied Indian higher education context. It also converges with the broader experiential avoidance literature: Chawla and Ostafin [26] characterised EA as a continuous transdiagnostic variable that perpetuates distress by entrenching psychological inflexibility, and Wang et al. [27] demonstrated that EA mediates the relationship between psychological distress and academic impairment in university students. The implication is that interventions which target EA particularly ACT-based acceptance and cognitive defusion techniques may disrupt the avoidance cycle that sustains impostor cognitions, offering a theoretically coherent route to reducing IP in college populations.

The regression of EA on FNE yielded the strongest predictive model in the study (H5, $\beta = 0.582$, $R^2 = 0.339$), indicating that EA accounted for approximately 34% of the variance in evaluative anxiety. This result is consistent with Clark and Wells' [16] cognitive model of social anxiety, which explains how safety behaviours conceptualised as behavioural expressions of EA prevent individuals from learning that feared social outcomes are either unlikely or tolerable, thereby maintaining and intensifying evaluative fear over time. Within the ACT framework, this relationship is theoretically expected because FNE reflects apprehension about aversive evaluative experiences, and individuals high in EA are predisposed to respond to such anticipated distress through avoidance rather than acceptance, amplifying rather than reducing its impact [8][27]. This finding extends the work of Lipschitz et al. [7], who demonstrated that EA moderates the relationship between academic stress and negative affect in college students, by specifically documenting that EA predicts the evaluative anxiety component of social anxiety in an Indian student sample. The magnitude of this effect has direct practical implications: in the Indian higher education context, where academic evaluation carries substantial cultural and social weight, students high in EA may be disproportionately vulnerable to evaluative anxiety [21]. ACT-based acceptance and defusion techniques may be particularly effective in reducing this vulnerability by helping students tolerate the discomfort of evaluative situations rather than escaping them.

The finding that IP significantly predicted FNE (H6, $\beta = 0.568$, $R^2 = 0.323$) indicates that impostor phenomenon independently accounts for 32.3% of the variance in fear of negative evaluation a magnitude comparable to that observed for EA. This result is theoretically coherent within both the social comparison and cognitive anxiety frameworks. Individuals high in IP are, by definition, chronically anticipating negative external judgment the feared discovery of their perceived incompetence rendering elevated FNE a predictable downstream consequence of impostor beliefs. This interpretation aligns with Clance's [11] clinical model, which posits that a core feature of IP is persistent vigilance for signs of external discovery, and with Stone et al. [31] and Levant et al. [32], who documented heightened evaluative vigilance and fear of exposure among students experiencing IP. Patzak et al. [29] similarly demonstrated that IP is embedded in broader patterns of maladaptive self-evaluation that include increased sensitivity to external judgment. The finding that IP independently predicts FNE at a magnitude comparable to that of EA suggests that targeting impostor cognitions through cognitive restructuring strategies may offer an additional pathway to reducing evaluative anxiety, complementary to EA-focused interventions. University counselling programmes combining ACT-based acceptance techniques with cognitive restructuring targeting impostor beliefs may therefore achieve greater reductions in FNE than programmes addressing either construct in isolation [35].

3.4. Moderation Analysis

H7 was supported. The moderation analysis revealed that the overall model was statistically significant, $R^2 = 0.474$, $F(3, 296) = 88.86$, $p < 0.001$, explaining 47.4% of variance in fear of negative evaluation. Both impostor phenomenon ($B = 0.304$, $SE = 0.042$, $p < 0.001$) and experiential avoidance ($B = 0.376$, $SE = 0.048$, $p < 0.001$) were significant positive predictors of FNE. The interaction term was also significant ($B = -0.004$, $SE = 0.001$, $p < 0.001$), accounting for an additional 4.2% of explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = 0.042$). Conditional effects analysis showed that impostor phenomenon significantly predicted FNE at low (effect = 0.190, $p < 0.001$), medium (effect = 0.115, $p < 0.001$), and high (effect = 0.044, $p = 0.043$) levels of experiential avoidance, with the strength of the relationship progressively decreasing as experiential avoidance increased (Table 4).

Table 4 Moderation Analysis: Effect of Impostor Phenomenon on Fear of Negative Evaluation Moderated by Experiential Avoidance (PROCESS Model 1, N = 300)

Model summary **Full model: R^2 = 0.474, F (3,296) = 88.862, MSE = 26.840, p = <0.001**					
Regression coefficients					
	B	SE	95% CI (LL)	UL	p
Constant	19.43	2.35	14.80	24.06	<0.001
Imposter Phenomenon	0.304	0.042	0.222	0.387	<0.001
Experiential Avoidance	0.376	0.048	0.282	0.470	<0.001
Imposter Phenomenon x Experiential Avoidance	-0.004	0.001	-0.005	-0.002	<0.001
Interaction term					
Imposter Phenomenon x Experiential Avoidance	ΔR^2 = 0.042, $F(1, 296)$ = 23.580 , p <0.001				

Note. The moderation model and the interaction effect were statistically significant at the p< 0..001 level.

The most theoretically novel finding of the present study is the significant negative moderation of the IP–FNE relationship by EA (ΔR^2 = 0.042, p < 0.001). The negative interaction coefficient (B = −0.004) indicates that as EA increases, the strength of the positive association between IP and FNE decreases. This is a counterintuitive finding that warrants careful theoretical interpretation. One might initially expect higher EA to amplify the IP–FNE relationship: if an individual avoids distressing internal experiences and simultaneously holds strong impostor beliefs, evaluative fear might be expected to intensify further. However, the observed moderation pattern reveals a more nuanced dynamic consistent with the ACT suppression account. Specifically, individuals high in EA due to their dispositional tendency to evade distressing experiences may suppress or disengage from the fear responses that would otherwise be triggered by impostor cognitions. In this sense, the avoidance response itself interrupts the cognitive pathway from impostor-related thoughts to the conscious experience of FNE. Rather than resolving the underlying cognitive vulnerability, EA temporarily mutes the subjective fear signal, resulting in a reduced conscious experience of evaluative anxiety even in the presence of strong impostor beliefs [5][27].

This suppression-based interpretation is grounded in the ACT account of how rigid avoidance prevents full emotional processing [8]. Within this framework, the individual does not learn that evaluative situations are survivable or that impostor fears are irrational, because avoidance prevents contact with the corrective experience. Gross [33] provided analogous evidence from the emotion regulation literature demonstrating that suppressive avoidance can temporarily reduce the subjective experience of negative affect while paradoxically maintaining and deepening underlying distress over time. The present finding extends this account to the specific context of IP-linked evaluative anxiety in college students, suggesting that EA does not weaken the IP–FNE relationship because it resolves it, but because it masks it. The clinical implication is important: students high in both IP and EA may appear outwardly calm or non-anxious despite holding significant evaluative vulnerability, leading counsellors who rely solely on observable anxiety symptoms to underestimate their distress. This pattern also helps explain the delayed or absent help-seeking documented among individuals high in EA and IP [29][10]: if avoidance suppresses the conscious experience of fear, the student may not recognise their own need for support.

Critically, the conditional effects analysis confirmed that the IP–FNE relationship remained statistically significant even at high levels of EA (conditional effect = 0.044, p = 0.043), indicating that avoidance attenuates but does not eliminate evaluative fear. This means that even among highly avoidant students, impostor beliefs retain independent predictive power over FNE. The implication is that EA and IP represent distinct, independently clinically relevant targets: reducing EA through ACT-based interventions may make the underlying FNE more consciously accessible and therefore more amenable to direct intervention, while simultaneously addressing IP through cognitive restructuring may reduce the evaluative sensitivity that underlies FNE. Morrison et al. [34] demonstrated that FNE is a treatment-responsive construct in cognitive-behavioural and mindfulness-based programmes, supporting its malleability as an intervention target. Cooper et al. [35] further showed that acceptance-based strategies directly reduce FNE and improve academic engagement in college students. Taken together, the moderation findings suggest that students high in both EA and IP represent a distinctive psychological risk profile characterised by concealed rather than overt vulnerability a profile

that campus mental health services should be equipped to identify proactively rather than waiting for students to self-refer.

The moderation finding also has direct relevance for Bandura's [19] self-efficacy framework. Students high in both IP and EA may avoid evaluative situations not because they lack fear of negative judgment, but because their general tendency to escape distressing internal states leads them to disengage behaviourally before the full intensity of evaluative fear is consciously experienced. As a result, FNE remains suppressed rather than resolved, potentially emerging in more intense forms when avoidance is no longer possible such as during compulsory examinations, viva voce assessments, or mandatory group presentations. In the Indian higher education context, where public evaluation is culturally significant and academic failure carries substantial social consequences, this deferred vulnerability may be particularly detrimental [21]. From a societal perspective, addressing these psychological barriers among Indian college students has implications for national mental health and workforce development. Psychological distress, including the constructs examined in this study, contributes to academic dropout rates and underemployment among graduates, placing significant economic and social burdens on families and institutions. By generating evidence-based knowledge about the mechanisms underlying student psychological distress, this study supports the development of scalable, culturally appropriate mental health initiatives that can promote the well-being and academic success of a diverse student population.

Summary

This study investigated the interrelationships among experiential avoidance (EA), impostor phenomenon (IP), and fear of negative evaluation (FNE) in a sample of Indian college students, using an integrated theoretical framework drawing on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Social Comparison Theory, Self-Discrepancy Theory, Clark and Wells' cognitive model of social anxiety, and Bandura's self-efficacy theory. All seven hypotheses were supported, providing robust empirical backing for the proposed model and confirming that the predicted pattern of relationships holds within a non-Western academic context that has remained largely underrepresented in the psychological literature.

4. Conclusion

Experiential avoidance emerged as the most influential variable in the model, demonstrating the strongest predictive relationships with both the impostor phenomenon (β = 0.528) and fear of negative evaluation (β = 0.582), confirming its status as a transdiagnostic process central to the maintenance of both impostor cognitions and evaluative anxiety. These findings are consistent with Acceptance and Commitment Therapy's 1909haracterized1909ion of experiential avoidance as a functionally upstream mechanism that sustains psychological distress across diagnostic categories. Perhaps the most theoretically significant finding was the counterintuitive negative moderation effect: rather than amplifying the impostor phenomenon – fear of negative evaluation relationship, higher levels of experiential avoidance were found to attenuate it, consistent with a suppression-based mechanism whereby avoidance temporarily mutes conscious evaluative fear even as the underlying psychological vulnerability remains intact. The resulting profile 1909haracterized by high impostor beliefs and high avoidance, yet relatively suppressed conscious fear constitutes a hidden risk profile that standard symptom-based screening approaches are likely to systematically overlook.

4.1. Implications

University counselling services should prioritise experiential avoidance as a primary intervention target; brief, group-format Acceptance and Commitment Therapy-based programmes designed to enhance psychological flexibility are theoretically well-grounded and practically feasible within resource-constrained campus settings. Because students high in experiential avoidance may not present with overt evaluative anxiety despite harbouring significant impostor beliefs, practitioners should proactively screen for both constructs rather than relying solely on observable distress or self-referral, as doing so risks systematically excluding this hidden risk group. At the institutional level, greater use of formative assessment, effort-focused attributional feedback, and deliberate normalisation of academic self-doubt can reduce evaluative threat at the population level before these patterns consolidate. This study also makes a meaningful contribution to the non-Western literature by providing the first empirical evidence, in an Indian college student sample, of the predictive and moderating relationships among experiential avoidance, the impostor phenomenon, and fear of negative evaluation, laying the groundwork for culturally sensitive, evidence-based intervention in Indian higher education.

4.2. Limitations and Future Directions

The cross-sectional, self-report design limits causal conclusions, and convenience sampling affects generalizability. Future research should use longitudinal or experimental designs, daily diary methods, partner reports, and more diverse samples. Broader and more diverse sampling, alongside culturally adapted measures validated for Indian student populations, would further strengthen generalisability. Most critically, randomised controlled trials examining whether Acceptance and Commitment Therapy-based programmes targeting experiential avoidance produce downstream reductions in both the impostor phenomenon and fear of negative evaluation would provide the essential next step in translating these findings into scalable, evidence-based campus mental health practice.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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